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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

April 19th, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

When the men who are fighting try to tell us in moments of sober reflection for what it is that they freely give their lives, we cannot listen too attentively to what they say.

THE HOPES OF FIGHTING MEN

The *Daily Sketch* in its issue of March 20th published an article found among the papers of Vice-Admiral R. H. C. Hallifax, who recently lost his life in an aeroplane accident. Through the courtesy of the editor I am permitted to quote part of it. If what gives meaning to the war, the writer argues, is that it is a battle for right against wrong, then the *real* fight did not begin on September 3rd, 1939, nor will it finish with a Peace Treaty.

"It is one that will go on, and we have to make up our minds on which side we are. This is fairly easy to do when the devil is stalking the earth in visible he-man form, but it won't be so easy through the peace conference and through the difficult years of reconstruction ahead. Yet we must be on one side or the other, on the side of good or the side of evil, and we must fearlessly declare which.

"We say we are fighting for freedom, but there is no such thing. We say we are fighting for justice. We say we are fighting for a better world. Yet, in reality, if we are true to ourselves, we are fighting for one thing and one thing only—goodness—and if we win that, we win a true freedom and a real justice and a new heaven and new earth, for we shall win God.

"We seem to be ashamed, or frightened, to face up to it and openly declare our aim, for we are all so desperately conscious of our own shortcomings. But that should not matter. It is the aim that matters, and if we fearlessly declared the aim and strove for it in public and private life we should progress along the right path instead of drifting aimlessly without any object, albeit from time to time we would surely individually and collectively transgress."

We may set by the side of this a letter which was made public some months ago, but may have escaped the attention of many of our readers. It was written to his father by a wounded and dying soldier in a hospital in Africa.

"I should like you to know what it is I died for, and for that reason I am going to try to express my feelings and hopes.

"There is, I feel, both in England and America, a tremendous surge of feeling, a feeling which, for want of a better word, I shall call 'goodness.' It is not expressed by the politicians or the newspapers,

for it is far too deep for them. It is the heartfelt longing of all the 'middling folk' for something better: a world more worthy for their children, a world more simple in its beliefs, nearer to earth and to God. I have heard it so often among soldiers in England and America, in trains, in factories in Chicago and in clubs in London. Sometimes so poorly expressed that one can hardly recognize it, but underlying it all there is that craving for a new life.

"This feeling is no less powerful or significant than the Renaissance was, and will, I hope and pray, surge over the whole world in a tidal wave—that is the ideal for which we are fighting."

To expose one's mind to the poignancy of these words is to be reminded of two facts that determine the whole life of man.

First, the goodness of which these writers speak is the very stuff of human life. Let it fade, and man becomes a wolf to other men. That is what many to-day believe him essentially to be, and what to a large extent in this time of war he actually is. But if he is that, he is no longer man. It is because these fighting men believe that humanity itself is at stake that they rightly judge that no price is too high to save it.

Secondly, the life of man has a tragic character because this human goodness, for all its loveliness—and who that has been privileged to see it flowering has not at times been moved to the verge of tears?—is infected with a taint. Its flashes of splendour come sometimes from a murky background. Even in the best, as they most of all know, it is apt to be fitful and patchy. When it becomes a settled habit, it is liable to corruption by the canker of pride. It often owes much to a favouring soil and climate, and is not strong enough to bear transplanting or to withstand bleak weather. To have the purity and passion that will give it power to redeem the world it needs to be re-born.

When we are moved by the longing that finds expression in the documents that have been quoted, and at the same time look out on society in the large and see the depths of its spiritual disintegration, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that what our generation needs more than anything else is to recover an understanding of the profound meaning of the great Christian conceptions of grace, forgiveness and the new birth. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr in his masterly diagnosis in the Gifford Lectures [1] of the historical situation, traces the error and plight of our present society to the almost complete triumph of the Renaissance over the Reformation, so that the vital insights of the latter "were lost even to the consciousness of large sections of Protestant Christianity." The hope for the future lies in a new synthesis of the truth in both. But if this synthesis is to come about, the first necessity is to recover the truths that have so long been forgotten.

THE ABOLITION OF MAN

The men whose words have been quoted gave their lives to prevent the goodness they prized so highly from being crushed by an external foe. We cannot be too much alive to the equal danger that it may be sapped and consumed by insidious forces from within.

[1] *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. 15s. each. Nesbit.

This is the danger to which Mr. C. S. Lewis seeks to arouse us in his Riddell Lectures.[1] The menace brought to our attention in these pungent discourses is not the terrible business of war, but the seemingly harmless matter of teaching English to the upper forms in schools. There has come into the hands of Mr. Lewis a recent text book for the teaching of English, which assumes and inculcates that all judgments of value are purely subjective. It repudiates, that is to say, the belief almost universally held until recent times, that our attitudes towards what we believe to be good or bad correspond to something real in the universe. Mr. Lewis perceives clearly where the new doctrine is going to land us and, like a good watchman, he sounds the trumpet.

In the past the responsible educators of mankind looked on their task as that of initiating new generations into a knowledge of an objectively existing system of values, to which their own lives no less than those of others must conform. They did not think that they could cut human nature to any pattern that they chose. But now everything is changed. Values have become natural phenomena. It is no longer a question of initiating new generations into truths and values which are the pole-star of human life, but of conditioning people to fulfil certain purposes.

The young are powerless to protect themselves. New psychological and sociological techniques have put unprecendented power into the hands of those who have charge of their upbringing. We hear much to-day of man's conquest of nature. But the benefits do not accrue to mankind as a whole. The effect of modern discoveries and inventions is to give to a small number of people in key positions, who know how to use them, power to exercise an enormously increased control over other men.

If those who have control of the young have ceased to believe in any objective goodness to which human life must conform, there is nothing left to guide them except their own natural impulses. Those who stand outside all judgments of value cannot have any ground for preferring one impulse to another. Thus the future "conditioned" welfare of mankind has come to depend on blind chance. There is only one end to this road—the abolition of man. The gravity of the situation lies in the fact that many of those engaged in carrying out the process are scarcely more aware than their victims of what they are doing. "Many a mild-eyed scientist in pince-nez, many a popular dramatist, many an amateur philosopher in our midst, means in the long run just the same as the present rulers of Germany."

CHILDREN IN THE OCCUPIED COUNTRIES

Once more the plea that the Government will allow small quantities of dried milk to mitigate the worst evils of malnutrition to pass through the blockade to the mothers and children of the occupied countries has been voiced by the Archbishop of Canterbury in the House of Lords with the support of other peers. Lord Horder described the tuberculosis situation in Poland, Belgium, France and Greece as "very serious indeed."

[1] *The Abolition of Man.* Oxford University Press, 2s. 6d.

He said that the calorific value of the rations in Belgium is half what is accepted by the medical profession as sufficient for health, and that in France it was even less. Refugees from Belgium show marked signs of malnutrition, including "hunger dropsy." His concern as a doctor was not so much with famine, which either kills or is relieved, as with prolonged malnutrition and hunger diseases, recovery from which he said, "can only occur in generations rather than in a life-time."

Once again the Government refused to relax the blockade, on the ground that the risk of assisting the enemy was too great and that to prolong the war for even one day would be a grave disservice to the occupied countries. Lord Selborne argued that the death rate in the occupied countries was not markedly higher than the normal, and emphasized the danger of any concessions being exploited by the Germans to their own advantage.

With the invasion of the Continent at hand the opportunity of this particular form of relief may have passed. It is all the more necessary to concentrate effort on the provision of adequate relief in the wake of the invading armies. If the debate in the Lords failed to achieve its immediate purpose, it ought to awaken the nation to the danger that we may be faced on the Continent by a situation resembling that described by the prophet Amos, when he speaks of the shepherd rescuing out of the lion's mouth "two legs or a piece of an ear." As the war draws to its climax, the more urgent it becomes so to wage it that at every point the ultimate purpose is kept steadily in view, lest those ends for which soldiers, sailors and airmen have given their lives remain no more than a dream.

THE SUPPLEMENT

The Christian News-Letter has a good many members in each of the British Dominions, but owing to the difficulty of communication in war time the contribution to our common thinking from these more distant parts has been much less than we should like. We are particularly glad, therefore, to publish in this issue a Supplement by a young Presbyterian Minister from New Zealand, who is now associated with Dr. George Macleod in the Iona Community. The autobiographical part of the paper is of exceptional interest in its description of the reaction of a vigorous group in the younger generation in New Zealand to some of the powerful formative influences of our time.

It will be observed that the Supplement brings up in a different context the same question that was the subject of the last News-Letter —the relevance of Christian teaching to life as it has to be lived in the dust and heat of the conflicts of modern society. The whole problem treated in the second half of the Supplement will continue to receive the closest attention of the Christian News-Letter and the Christian Frontier.

Yours sincerely,

D. M. Oakley

THEOLOGICAL AND LAY RESPONSIBILITY

DEAR DR. OLDHAM,

I think that I can best introduce the concern which is the subject of this letter by giving you a minimum of autobiography. I was a student in New Zealand during the depression years of the early thirties. I had been busy in work in the Student Christian Movement for seven or eight years, during which my student generation learnt its Christianity from the theological liberals of the post-war decade, and from them also learnt an urgent concern with the business of "Christianizing the social order." On this basis we had already taken on some political commitments, were active in the peace movement and keen about disarmament, about the time when young James Green spoke for youth at the Disarmament Conference of 1932. Most of us were militant pacifists, and some had been in conflict with authority in a fight against conscription, which after being imposed during the last war was not repealed in New Zealand until 1927.

When the depression came, then, we were not only members of politically-conscious student groups, but were in touch with the militant sections of the working-class, the communist party and the unemployed workers' movement, and therefore deeply involved as soon as the industrial struggle became acute.

It did become very acute indeed, for New Zealand's dependence upon export trade meant that the country took the full shock of the world slump—and since we were accustomed to prosperity very little provision had been made for relief. A conservative government, it seemed to us, was inclined to deny the realities of the situation and to feel that New Zealand's reputation (and their own) depended upon pretending that things were better than they seemed. They were possessed by a dogged determination too that New Zealand's social life should not be disfigured by "the dole," whose dire effects on personal and social morale in Britain had been for years a pet theme for reactionary polemics.

In the issue the workers and their families went hungry. Some literally starved—and thousands who were not content to starve rioted in the streets, till each of the major cities had seen open disorder.

THE PROBLEMS OF CLASS AND POWER

For us younger Christians all this meant a revision of our social thinking. It had been bred in us that Christianity must be "applied" to the social order, meaning in general that a Christian

spirit must be brought to bear, and a solution of social problems found by way of an appeal to "Christian principles." But here was naked injustice and an open conflict of class, and we were bound to take account of the reality of exploitation, of class-tension and of the Marxist analysis of class-struggle. We saw the grim reality of economic power and its crude mastery of the lives of men. We had to take Marxism and scientific socialism seriously as the only tolerably adequate account of the facts of the case, and to ask how "Christian principles" could make their impact in that kind of situation.

That was in 1932. And in 1932 the impulse of theological revival began to be felt in New Zealand—far more powerfully, so it appears, than ever it was felt here. The impact of Karl Barth's teaching, and continental theology generally, transformed the thinking of the live elements in the colleges and of the younger men in the ministry, and remodelled the theological outlook of a significant minority, not only in one denomination. (As an aside, it is probably worth recording that certain Anglican students on vacation climbed three hitherto unscaled peaks in the New Zealand Southern Alps, and named them for all time after Barth and two other leaders of the continental theology. They were rebuked by an Archdeacon when they got back to civilization, demanding to know whether they could not have found reputable Anglican divines whose names might have been perpetuated in that way! This is a fair account of the Church situation in those years.)

For my present purpose the important thing is that these two impulses, the realistic social analysis of Karl Marx and the strongly biblical theology of Karl Barth, came together and had to be related. I doubt if it occurred to many of us that these two emphases, which had hit us simultaneously and convincingly, were in the least degree inconsistent. The Barthian theological emphasis taught us to take the Church seriously as a covenanted community, subject to the Gospel in a world which God governs by His law; called to undertake the obligations of citizenship and to exceed these obligations by Gospel obedience. To this new outlook Marxism was entirely congenial—since it interpreted the contemporary form of man's age-old struggle for a personal livelihood and for social peace, and showed how the law of God's justice is in our day being defied and how it must be defended in a world torn by class-war.

Looking back, I have a pretty shrewd feeling that we young Christian liberals, confronted by the strength and coherence of Marxism, might have left the Christian Church for the revolutionary cause, rather than be content with the denial of the social realities which Christian idealist liberalism in fact involved. What Barth did for us was to confirm the conviction, forced on us by Marxism and the facts of the case, that our analysis of the social problem must be driven deep enough to take account of the dynamics of

power and class, and that there is both biblical warrant and biblical guidance for so doing.

(One practical outcome of this was the conviction that one cannot with integrity make any protest about the presence of privilege alongside under-privilege unless one fulfils the claims of justice in concrete personal terms within the limits set by the texture of the economic order. This appeared to mean getting rid of economic privilege by some kind of " de-classing " of oneself, hence the development of income-sharing experiments on a " national average " basis.)

BARTH, MARX AND THE LITTLE POOR MAN

In our discussions at that time we were in the habit of linking the names of Marx and Barth and St. Francis—a curious assemblage from some points of view, but I still think it has some point to it as showing the emphases which we then felt to be important.

For whatever we may make of the details of Barth's position, I take it that he stands essentially for the reality of the Church as a covenanted people, whose law is God's Word in Christ, a community which " is born of God's Word, abides therein, and knows not the voice of a stranger." Being so bound to God they are bound to one another by the faith which they learn of Him, the hope which they have in Him, and the love which they bear to one another for His love's sake. This is the ancient Faith : Barth recalled us to the place where we could be nurtured in this Faith—to the Word of God in the congregation.

Marx stood to us for the conviction that when these committed men of God move about in the world to do His will they must use the truest and best insights which secular knowledge can provide. We believed that " the man who is afraid of facts does not believe in God," and that all truth is Christ's truth (from whatever source it comes) since " without Him was not anything made that was made." If Marxism then could make good its claim to be a scientific sociology, then it had to be taken seriously as speaking truth about the world created and fallen, and as determining the form of Christian men's duty in dealing with the problems of history and society. The point here is not the measure of truth in Marxism, but the right of the scientist in his own sphere, subject always to the claim of God upon the scientist himself for scientific integrity and a regard for all the facts.

The name of Francis of Assisi was simply the sign and seal of the conviction that there can be no obedience to the Gospel which does not express itself in solidarity with those to whom the Gospel is brought, nor can any protest be made with integrity against social wrong as long as privilege is clung to. Marx pointed inevitably to Francis, since it seemed to us that the Marxian thesis that violent

revolution was forced on society by the unwillingness of the privileged to de-class themselves was a refraction of the Gospel warning about the exclusion of rich men from the Kingdom. If that were so, it demanded from the Christian an answer in conduct irrespective of what the wider historical possibilities of voluntary surrender of privilege might be.

THE BRITISH SITUATION

I came to Britain in 1939, and naturally began to look around for the British expression of these two concerns which had been formative for my own student generation—the concern with soundly biblical theology, and the concern with radical experimentation in Christian discipline and social action—and did find them.

On the one hand, there was a number of experiments in Christian obedience. There was a growing movement towards Christian community—self-subsistent communities on the land, income-sharing groups and other signs of a struggle for Christian integrity within an acquisitive society. There was the Iona Community, which seemed precisely what the total situation demanded, a positive effort at bridging the gap between the ecclesiastical set-up and the normal life of the masses of the people.

On the other hand, there were signs of theological renewal. The impact of Barth had been felt, certainly, and in every major denomination there was a theological stirring, especially among minority groups of younger men. The effect of this ferment generally was to bring about a reaction against liberalism and in favour of a " high " churchmanship biblically grounded, embodying a concern for authentic Church order and a worthy liturgy, and greater integrity and biblical consistency in preaching. This general trend is visible both in Scotland and in England, both in the establishment and in " non-conformity." It cuts across denominational differences, and its influence among younger ministers is doubtless due in part to the fact that it recovers something integral to the Christian tradition, and perhaps to the more dubious reason that it can be twisted to strengthen clerical prerogatives. But there it is, expressing itself in the existence of a journal like *The Presbyter*, in the *Forward Books* published by the Independent Press, in a new interest in the historic confessions, in the growth of all kinds of study-groups for the study of " reformed theology," and so on.

But here's the rub. . . . It seemed to me in 1939, and it seems to me now, that these two tendencies are proceeding in disastrous isolation from each other. The theological concern is in one sense too exclusively theological—it tends to pooh-pooh community experiments as partaking of crankiness and sectism. So they often do. But nevertheless there is deep danger in this hiatus between valid theological work and costly Christian activity. It is contrary

to the Christian genius—for the ages of faith have been the times when a strong theological concern has been yoked with radical Christian behaviour. Something has gone wrong here, and a dangerous gulf has opened. Theological work tends to barrenness, and much Christian activity lacks valid direction. The recognition that this is so lays a responsibility on the whole Church, whose preoccupation it ought to be to see that Christian "theory and practice" are kept closely yoked together.

EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL DOCTRINE

I doubt if we always appreciate how far this question of getting theology and practice into proper relation is bound up with effective evangelism. The emphasis in contemporary evangelism, broadly speaking, is to show that "religion has relevance for life." Men are certainly being lost to us because we do not convince them that the Faith can "speak to their condition." But I am convinced that men are equally being lost to us because, while we say with great emphasis that "religion has relevance for life," we don't manage to convince them that Christian doctrine really can interpret the situation of contemporary man, guide his action, and set him intelligible and fruitful tasks within the large-scale industrial society in which his life is set.

Let me point to two symptomatic groups, whose present relation to the Church illustrates the point I want to make. They are minority groups both of them, but recognisable and significant. The first group is the product of diligent Church work during this last generation—young people who have had the nurture of Christian homes and who know the interior life of the Christian congregation, who have had all we know how to give them in Sunday-school, church club and confirmation class. They have been church members, many of them, yet in a steady stream they are leaving the Church for atheistic radicalism—often, but not always, in the communist party—not because they want to shake off the shackles of piety and give way to libertinism, but because of that very humane concern which they have learnt in the Church, but which the Church has not taught them how to translate into action in the tangled world of power-politics and social conflict of which they have become aware in their late 'teens. They are leaving the Church to take a radical part in the social struggle, because for them Christianity means either the Church-as-it-is with its crippling vested interest in the existing order, or—if the Church rose to the height of its own profession and "took Jesus seriously"—a Tolstoian idealism, which they might respect as a heroic creed, but would reject as irrelevant to their own immediate choices and to the problems of contemporary justice. They are apparently, for all their church nurture, unaware

of the great *corpus* of social doctrine which Christian theology has made available, and go off to Marxism to find firm standing-ground.

There is a corresponding group among artisans. Presbyterianism in Scotland and evangelicalism in England had a considerable hold among working-men even until a generation ago. That hold is slipping now, and this changing relation between the artisan and the Church has been analysed from more than one point of view in the News-Letter. It has a variety of causes : but part of the reason why artisans are progressively absent from church congregations and church assemblies, so I believe, lies in an essential integrity which will not allow them to profess on Sundays a standard of fraternity and of service to God which appears to bear no relation to the demands which competitive industry makes on them on Mondays. Such men fought one another and the boss for a living in the depression years, were saved from unemployment only to make war, and are fearful that the end of the war will bring the cut-throat struggle back again, with each man's hand against his neighbour and the scales heavily weighted against them all. For many of them, when their memory is not of unemployment during these last two decades, it is of work without social purpose, shoddy work under bad conditions, work for the enrichment of a few, work which must be made to last as long as possible, since the completion of the job means unemployment once again. Subject to these pressures, and with no way out while livelihood for themselves and their dependants depends on their keeping up the fight, they cannot translate the Sunday sermon into terms of week-day obedience—for how can a man bring " religion " into this kind of " life " ?—and it is in part a kind of dogged if inarticulate integrity that makes them stay away from church.

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

What is the peculiar function of the theologian in this situation ? And of the minister in his capacity as church teacher ?

When the theologian approaches that " frontier " area where valid action and decision must depend as much on factual and technical knowledge as on Christian faith and intention, he is exposed to two dangers. Either he will be so concerned not to exceed his prerogatives, so anxious to " respect the autonomy of the technician in his own sphere," that he will fail to speak with authority when issues of Christian doctrine are in fact involved, or, on the other hand, he may try to make Christian doctrine do more than its own proper work, in which case he will dabble fruitlessly in matters he is ill-equipped to deal with. At the more practical level, he will tend either to deal in general exhortations to " glorify God in your daily work " or to " make work an act of worship,"

without recognizing the real nature of the choices which face men who want to do this : or else he will venture on to ground where he cannot walk at all surely, with advice about the running of the workshop, the trade union and the shop-stewards' committee which bears no relation to the facts of the local case.

In this matter of theology and practice, it would appear that before we can usefully discuss " the Church and the secular order," we need to develop much more positively than has so far been done a doctrine of the purpose of God for the secular order itself. To build up such a doctrine in contemporary terms is an obligation plainly laid upon the theologian. It is properly implied in his calling. It is common in theological circles to say with Karl Barth that " theology is the criticism of the Church's message." That is to say, the theologian is charged by the Church with the responsibility of seeing that the testimony of the Church is valid, and in conformity with the Faith once delivered to the saints. It is not a negative function, a mere bringing of heretics to judgment, but depends upon honest and positive exposition in ever new terms of the unchanging content of the scriptural revelation. Where the theologian is faithful in this work, he is the legitimate authority in the Church in matters of doctrine and preaching and liturgy (the last simply in the sense of the worthy ordering of the Church's corporate worship). That is true and vital as far as it goes, and the point of the theological revival so far is a new urgency that theology should perform precisely this work in the Church, and so give greater coherence and validity to the Church's doctrine and worship.

But what tends to be forgotten is that the whole life of the Church is not comprised under the headings of doctrine and worship, and that the function of theology is not fully performed when these departments of the Church's life are rightly ordered. The Church is not only a worshipping community and the " custodian " of true doctrine ; it is also a disciplined community, the character of whose life and whose whole bearing before the world must be a testimony to the faith by which it lives. Further, and here we come to the particular work which theology must do if it is to meet our contemporary case, this community is in constant traffic with the world, in the coming and going of its members in the secular order. A responsible theology will concern itself not only with doctrinal and liturgical " rightness," but with the character of the Church's internal and external relations. It will ask responsible questions not only about the content of the Sunday sermon and the order of the Sunday service, but about the character of the Church's investments and the financial relations between the Church's members. It will make it its urgent business not only to see that the Church's teaching faithfully reproduces the apostolic testimony

in contemporary terms, but that its members are equipped to make and to implement Christian decisions in secular life. This does not at all mean that theology will dictate these decisions. Its business is rather to teach men how Christian decisions are made. Catholic scholasticism was formulated in a vastly different world: how far its insights will serve our day is one question on which work is being done and which needs to be pursued. Reformation theology embodies important teaching at this point, teaching largely unappropriated as yet by us in Britain. But the work must be done again, though it will best be done by those who have mastered traditional formulations. Their real capacity for the work will chiefly be measured by their readiness to expose themselves to the word of God in Scripture and to the tormenting facts of the contemporary case.

THE LAYMAN'S TASK

If laymen demand, as they rightly do, that theology and the ministry should perform their whole task for the guidance of Christians, but should not try to do more than they are equipped to do; this implies that there is a specific work for Christians in which the clergy have no special qualifications, work for which, in fact, the clergy are disqualified by the fact that they do not earn their living among the normal stresses of commercial, industrial and professional life. It is by the activity of believing men that the Church normally makes its impact upon society and its penetration into the secular order . . . to what end? Surely, and simply, that these believing men may in the normal texture of their life, in their dealings with things and with other men, "glorify God in their bodies and spirits, which are His." This will imply in the first place the godly ordering of that area of life which they touch and influence, and the bearing of such a testimony in word and life as will bring other men to acknowledge the reign of God. The enrichment of the Church's understanding in all these matters depends as much upon the cumulative experience of its members as upon the teaching of its theologians. Almost certainly no denomination has yet learned how to call on the living insight of its lay members for the enlightenment of others on this very problem.

Yours sincerely,
ALEXANDER MILLER

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